TITLE: Encounters: exploring the element of time.

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May 1, 2007
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A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
Encounters: an installation exploring the element of time

“Tradition is the tending of the fire, not the worship of the ashes.”

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe.

Artist Statement:

Encounters is a time-based installation dealing with the notion of time as constantly changing. It is a process that one deals with in all aspects of life. Certain things, certain attitudes go through a transformation in a new environment, but their inherent characteristics always remain the same. The exhibit echoes my personal journey as an artist within my own culture and tradition juxtaposed against acquired cultural experiences in a new environment with added layers that are not always implicit.

The entire installation echoes the juxtaposition of physical entity of ice and water with traditional geometrical pattern on an acrylic base as a backdrop to superimpose a large-scale video projection of fire and flame. The multi-faceted environment using special lighting and sound techniques creates a dialog between time and space as being ephemeral and in constant flux within a complex narrative that is very personal.
Abstract:

"Nature commonly exhibits an overlying pattern that manifests itself in the form of three stages: development, duration, and reabsorption. For example, we, as organic beings, develop from an embryo, spend some time on Earth (duration), and then are reabsorbed by the Earth at the time of our death. The same is true for every other living organism. We can take this natural pattern and make an analogy using geometry: a geometrical point (zero-dimension) can develop into three-dimensional space through movement. Three-dimensions can become one again through a backwards regression of the development. That is, a single point can move in a straight path to form a line. The line can then translate or rotate to form a plane (two-dimensional space) and, likewise, movement of the plane will create volume (three-dimensional space)."\(^1\)

I am very intrigued by the harmony that exists between how space is used in different cultures and societies, with certain subtle nuances. My art is a synthesis of life experiences I have had thus far – first as a child growing up in my native country Bangladesh, then as a teenager in Pakistan and eventually as an adult educated and living in the United States.

In my work, I am always looking for the balance between the physical and the spiritual aspect of space, of the materials used and the feelings evoked, as well as its relationship

\(^1\) Islamic Art: Geometric patterns and nature
to the environment. I particularly want to explore the impact of Islamic art and design in contemporary settings that incorporate the use of all our senses through the use of water as an element in courtyards, geometric design, arabesque pattern and calligraphy as expressions for surface decoration and the concept of layering and hidden art through the use of varied materials and techniques. The notion that somehow these experiences can be synthesized into an encounter using universal concepts such as time and space is what my work is all about.

*Encounters* is a body of work that uses the four archetypal elements – earth, water, air and fire to explore the universal nature of time and space in a constant state of flux, to create a narrative that uses traditional concepts inherent to me within the contemporary context expressing the dichotomy that exists between eastern values and western notions. The installation is pure and simple yet filled with complexity and symbolism. Pure Islamic forms such as square is used both as an element sculpturally as well as in pattern motifs. Natural materials like granite and ice in its varied forms (both structured as well as organic) is juxtaposed against contemporary materials such as stainless steel fabric, aluminum and acrylics incorporating motifs in various different combinations – etched and in relief as well as in the form of lattice with positive and negative spaces to create an environment that is balanced and integrated within a subtle multiplicity. Video imagery both as independent as well as part of the overall installation showing fire in its most basic form against the sound of water that evoke primordial sensation which act as a backdrop to create a metaphor of time and space in a constant state of flux and change.
Historical Context

Universal Symbols:

The concept of archetypal symbols as timeless that are used to understand the eternal concepts of the universe within a temporal setting without regards to race, gender, and ethnicity is the basis for my investigation. The four archetypal elements – earth, water, air and fire are basic to all human cultures and beliefs and act as symbols to explain patterns in nature. Whereas, these concepts are primordial and deals with spirituality in ancient cultures of Hinduism and Buddhism it also has a significant manifestation in European concepts of the Enlightenment through Greek Literature which has informed and influenced modern thoughts and culture and which I seek to further explore.

Islamic Art:

“Natural symbols, such as processes of nature, form certain systems of order that are symmetrical or rhythmical, or both. Man through his art forms, emulates these orders by creating forms which are symmetrical with respect to their center and which symbolizes “unity within unity” the first principle of Islam (tawhid). The complementary system is nature patterns – simultaneous, staggered, or harmonious cycles with no beginning and no end- a system symbolizing the inexhaustible multiplicity of creation, the effusion of Being that emanates from the One: “multiplicity within unity.”

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2 The Sense of Unity, pg.6
"Seek the interior," the batin, for paradise is within one's self\(^3\) (Ibn Arabi)

The installation has its impetus within my own historical and traditional background of Islamic art and architecture within the geographical and cultural context of South Asia juxtaposed against my professional education and experiences in the contemporary artistic milieu of the United States considered the West.

Islamic art is a contemplative art reflecting the Unity of He who is above All (One God), and His multiplicity of manifestations as is evident in the universe. It seeks to capture the essence – the inward beauty or the hidden qualities of all things – the concept of Zahir (physical) and Batin (spiritual), which is manifested within the notion of architecture and interior spaces; the idea of layering through veil. Influenced by preceding cultures of Greeks and Romans to the West and Sassanian, Parthian, Hindu and Buddhist to the East; Muslim scholars were exposed to numerous ideas, thoughts, building and artistic vocabulary around them which they integrated into their art. They incorporated concepts of mathematics learned from the Greeks as a means to convey the order of the universe. The use of geometrical patterns symbolic of the processes of nature as cyclical, in which forms start with a center and emanates from it into infinite patterns symbolic of the concept of Unity and Multiplicity, is one of the main characteristics. The concept of shapes and forms are also very significant in Islamic art, the symbol of square, expressing unity of Allah, as a perfect form is very important. Early mosque was square in plan as also is manifested in the shape of Ka’ba which is considered as the center of the

\(^3\) The Sense of Unity, pg. 35
universe. The square of the Kaa’ba is considered as the basic shape echoing the four corners of the world with a center where all elements meet. The forms of the east specifically Buddhism, Hinduism and Zoroastrian has a correlation to that of Islam – square, circle. The mandala resonates the concepts of east and west, positive negative, life-death. The human civilization is truly a narrative, which builds upon one another. It is believed that through the laws of mathematics and geometry one gets to understand the order – of God’s creation. The use of calligraphy as an expression of the word of God to embellish and decorate surfaces is a significant element of Islamic art. Natural motifs such as plants and leaves are expressed in decoration known as Arabesques, together with the use of water symbolizing paradise an important concept to Arab Muslims who hailed from the desert. Thus, geometry, calligraphy and arabesques was used in myriad of sophisticated and intricate ways as a means of surface decoration so that matter is transformed from any literal interpretation to allow for a contemplative reflection symbolic of the multiplicity of creation.

“Combining the fluidity of nature with the geometric transfiguration of surfaces is the characteristic achievement of the harmonic technique........ the structural organization of surfaces promotes form. The transcendent quality is attained through natural patterns that float in relief against passive or neutral backgrounds organized in geometric compartments......... A softening of geometric shapes through pattern and color is here achieved which both balances the created work and allows several levels of qualitative comprehension.”

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⁴ The Sense of Unity, pg 35
In my installations I have used square geometrical motif as an abstract element of logic and order which is symbolic of the physical or earthly aspects of this world viz. the four corners of the world coming together in the center as the symbol of spirituality.

Square motif as an element

Thus, the traditional elements of Islamic art within a contemporary context become the basis of my investigation as I explore universal concepts in a personal search to create a dialog on many levels. It is my conviction that through the language of art that appeals to all we can attempt to understand our common shared heritage in this day and age.

**Contemporary Context**

Just as the historical aspect is a crucial part of my investigation, it is also extremely important that I am able to express my ideas in contemporary settings. My work is inclusive of the ethos of early twentieth century Modernism, its shift towards geometric abstraction and the contemporary artistic context of twenty-first century. The notion to reject all representational and realistic art to the non-representational (non-objective) art
has its precedence in Islamic art as well as other Eastern traditions. The advances in scientific revolution and the invention in photography which led to early art movements including Futurism, Cubism, Constructivism, Suprematism and De Stijl have contributed to this shift. After WWII many new movements and styles emerged particularly in the United States as a rejection to modern art such as Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. Minimalism was one such movement that has influenced my work together with the notion of Installation art in which through the use of digital media techniques including video, sound, and lighting the viewer is critically engaged with the experience. Within the context of my investigation I realize that art and religion intersect in the way forms are used. Although my work is influenced by my religious beliefs I tend to create a dialog on purely artistic level and bring to perspective the commonality that exists amongst all races. Thus, in the context of globalization I hope my art is perceived as a synthesis of many different attitudes, cultures and notions – where boundaries are blurred to create art that will appeal to all.

In the light of the above historical analysis of the characteristics of Islamic Art within the contemporary context of art and the archetypal symbols used I will now focus on the evolution of the body of work I have been exploring known as Encounters.
Research:

My investigation explores the relationship of how one’s environment has a profound impact on the ability to express one’s self – how one’s past informs the present within a contemporary context. The notion that somehow these experiences can be synthesized into an experience is what my inquiry is all about. The process goes through design development, materials exploration, fabrication and installation. Each installation is independent in and of itself yet it is part of the total body of work, and serves to inform the outcome of the final exhibition at The Georgia Museum of Art.

As stated earlier, the conceptual framework of all the installations takes its inspiration from both contemporary notions as well as traditional concepts. Forms are envisaged as symbolic of the concepts I am trying to convey beginning with the first installation, ‘Dimensions.’ A mixed-media installation incorporating video projections as a backdrop to a three dimensional calligraphic form in a minimalist manner to convey the notion of space and time in transformation. In subsequent installations, ‘Encounters,’ universal elements such as water, earth and fire in its varied forms and shapes are used as a basis to explore notions of time and space. The forms such as squares/cubes are incorporated with geometrical and calligraphic patterns against a backdrop of traditional and contemporary materials to convey the concepts. My work is contemporary in nature and although it has cultural connotations its appeal is universal and engages viewers on a personal level. It is process-oriented both on a conceptual level as well as on an execution level. The physical outcome of the structure and form is not very technical but requires stock materials
coming together incorporating technology to achieve the results that I desire. I approach each of these installations from concept to execution as an architect/interior designer. Once the conceptual design is approved, design drawings are developed exploring different materials and its relationship to the concept. Upon finalizing the materials, working drawings are developed which is supplied to the fabricators to work from. The final stage of the process is the installation, which requires proper planning and execution.

The evolution of the final installation is a series of independent site-specific experiential installations, which were as follows:

1. **Dimensions: a site-specific experiential installation using light, imagery and sound**, Lamar Dodd School of Art (LDSOA)

2. **Encounters: exploring the element of time**, Lamar Dodd School of Art, Courtyard Gallery (LDSOA)

3. **Encounters: exploring the element of time**, Athens Institute for Contemporary Art (ATHICA)

4. **Encounters: an installation exploring the element of time**, Georgia Museum of Art (GMOA)

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**1. Dimensions: a site-specific experiential installation using light, imagery and sound**

Dimensions was the first in a series of investigations that played a key role in the final outcome of the final installation. It deals with the idea of space in transformation (ephemeral) constantly. How it redefines and re-appropriates itself according to individual experiences exploring manipulation of space using video art and sculpture as
one moves through time and space both physically as well as spiritually. The traditional concept of layering and veil is explored through the use of stainless steel fabric to create a calligraphic sculpture around an upright stainless steel pole echoing the ontological axis of man. A traditional geometric square motif symbolic of the four corners of the world with a center is fabricated on to a contemporary material known as synthetic stucco or dryvit. A virtual calligraphic banding in Kufic script is overlayed as part of the projection which includes a site-specific video of fire and water using light and sound creating a narrative that evoke feelings in the observer on many levels.

The installation consists of a video projected symmetrically, on the blinds (window wall) of 'water' in motion and the polar opposite of it 'fire' as elements that one relates to universally juxtaposed on the top beam with calligraphy in Kufic script as an image, from an earlier project that was a springboard for this research. A traditional synthetic stucco tile with a geometrical motif appropriates the space within the context of the elements used: water/fire. Sound of water at various intensity and texture echoing the movements of the fire is incorporated into the video as part of the installation. On the center of the
room in alignment with the door is a life-size three dimensional kufic calligraphic
sculpture in contemporary stainless steel fabric in two tones i.e. gold and silver - echoing
juxtaposition of modernity and tradition in contemporary settings. As one moves through
this site-specific experiential installation space it evokes feelings of internal search in a
transient environment.

Dimensions: study sketches

2. Encounters: exploring the element of time

LDSOA – Courtyard gallery

Building upon the learning’s from the Dimensions installation, I sought to explore the
concepts further into an experience that incorporated the following elements:
manipulation of space as constantly changing – ephemeral and transient; the use of
traditional Islamic motifs in geometrical pattern; the use of universal archetypal elements
like water, earth, fire and air to convey the concept of time and space in constant flux; the
use of natural materials juxtaposed against contemporary materials to echo the
dichotomy/polarity as something one experiences in all aspects of life; to attempt to
arouse the five senses i.e. seeing (eyes), touch (hand), taste (tongue), smell (nose), sound
(hear); and create a sense of layering using different materials as a means to explore the
notion of hidden art/veil.
The entire installation echoes the concept of courtyard “charbagh” prevalent in Islamic
architecture. The exhibit through the use of different materials shows the notion of time
as constantly changing. Contemporary materials such as acrylic and stainless steel fabric
is juxtaposed against natural materials like water and granite in a dialog that manifests
itself in an environment that is constantly changing in its form and shape during the
course of the exhibit which evoke experiences that are very personal. The installation is a
reference to the square of the Ka’bah, incorporating the four corners of the world with the
symbolic center of the universe where all things and ideas gravitate towards and from,
“The Kah’bah: Sometimes the static perfection of the square or cube is combined with the
dynamic symbolism of the circle. Such is the case with the Kabah, which is the center of
the rite of circumambulation.........(the rite) expresses with precision the relationship
existing between the sanctuary and the celestial movement.”
In a contemporary context this was also inspired by the work of Gregor Schneider’s
“Cube Venice 2005,” which was meant to “remind us of the cultural elements people of

Cube Venice, 2005

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5 The Sense of Unity, pg. 29
different religions have in common. Due to the sensitivities it might entail, the work was rejected although it did create a lot of interest in the subject matter.

Two-interlocked square bases at differing heights fabricated of 3/4" acrylic sits at the center of the exhibit, which acts as a base for the patterned ice blocks and the catch basin with rough cut granite blocks for the melting ice. Stainless steel fabric symbolic of a shroud and veil creates an element of layering and acts as an enclosure for the acrylic base holding the ice and granite blocks. Indirect entry points are incorporated into the design through which to experience the installation. Geometric square motif that represents the four cardinal points of the world with a celestial center is used as a means to appropriate the installation, which has both symbolic as well as personal associations. The motif is used in a variety of materials and techniques: as a relief pattern in blocks of ice, granite blocks, vinyl floor motifs and aluminum lattice panels. Calligraphic patterns within the square vocabulary were incorporated at the entrance threshold in an acrylic header, thus creating another element of visual coherence within the exhibit.
Floor Plan with section showing the two interlocking square acrylic bases

View showing a square enclosure of stainless steel fabric on granite base with the geometrical motif etched echoing the geometry of the space.

The installation as a site specific piece was successful on many levels: conceptually it conveyed the ideas and notions that I had attempted to and generated interest and dialog on many levels specifically the use of elements such as water and granite against the backdrop of traditional Islamic vocabulary. The installation was indeed time bound both on a conceptual level and structural yet it had a timeless element to it. The materials kept changing according to the nuances of the lighting, sound and simply the way in which
people interacted with it and conveyed the notion of ethereal. Despite these successes there were challenges that needed to be resolved. Amongst them was the conceptual interplay between the ice and the rough-cut granite block, the challenge of the structural elements and the limitations of the materials particularly the stainless steel fabric.

Floor motif on vinyl

View into the exhibit

Calligraphic motif on acrylic header

3-d view: study of ice/base
Different manifestations of the installation as time progressed
3. Encounters: an installation exploring the element of time

Athens Institute for Contemporary Art (ATHICA)

My "Encounters" installation was part of the group exhibition titled Transience: The Paradox of Being, which included sixteen artists from US, at Athens Institute for Contemporary Art (ATHICA)

The Athica installation was a turning point in the evolution of the Encounters where it was installed in an outdoor setting of natural light and sound. Despite its success, it was evident that the dichotomy that I was trying to create between structured form of ice and the free form of blocks of granite needed further exploration. The transient nature of ice once changed its state into liquid took the shape of the container amidst pieces of granite that was not totally resolved. The issue of the materials and their limitations needed further investigation as well.

The transformation of ice to water went through a process reminiscent of changes one goes through in one’s life – a metaphor for life itself.
4. Encounters: an installation exploring the element of time

Georgia Museum of Art (GMOA)

The final site-specific experiential installation was the synthesis of my work thus far and incorporated all the key elements including video, sound and lighting to create a total experience that was both contemporary as well as primordial.

The audio-visual theatre at the Georgia Museum of Art with fixed seating was altered into a space with raised platform as a backdrop for the two square interlocking acrylic bases to hold the ice and crushed granite in polar opposite of each other. The design was an evolution of the previous installations in different settings that incorporated both the digital aspect of video, light and sound juxtaposed against traditional elements such as lattice panels, geometrical motifs in varying materials and forms to create a space that was truly transformational.
The use of contemporary materials such as aluminum, acrylic and ice with traditional motifs transformed through the use of computer technology using laser-cutting and water jets echoing the hybrid nature of contemporary settings where historical concepts are given new meanings. The use of blocks of granite with the etched motif was juxtaposed against crushed granite in a direct correlation to its volume, pressed with the same motif in negative pattern was a metaphor for dichotomy and polarity. The ice blocks with relief motif echoed a similar relationship with the crushed granite. The sound of water in its most elemental form juxtaposed against the imagery of fire in its most basic state evoked primal experiences as if in a sanctuary of some sorts.
In conclusion the testimonials of the viewers attest to the success of the installation. For many it represented the synergy of the elements of our universe and the myriad of perspectives to be discovered. The use of fire and ice, metal and stone aptly depicted the polarities found in life and yet how complete balance can be achieved. One often thinks of the use of elements (metal, stone, ice) as hard or cold, yet walking into the space, one felt engulfed with warmth (something about the lighting, the sounds, the fire, the sand, and the universal patterns reflected in each of the elements). There was an utter sense of peace and harmony amongst the intersection of all these elements. The patterns and motifs reflective of Islamic architecture in multiplicity further enhanced the ideas of polarity, positive/masculine and negative/feminine. The positive aspect directs energy outwardly and the negative aspect receives and allows the creative process to occur. This concept was evident in the representation of positive formation of the ice blocks and the negative impressions in the crushed granite. The soundtrack stimulated hearing and at times synchronized with the video and at other times stood apart. The senses were activated and one could even taste the ice, and even though there was not a distinct aroma, one "smelled" the coolness of the room. The installation transformed -- not only because of the ice melting, and the water seeping into the sand, but also because of the multitude of ways in which it allowed the viewers to interact with the space. The elements fuse and unite and undergo a metamorphosis. The installation was both time-bound and timeless, structured yet free. To some it was a very compelling view of what is occurring in our world today and what is possible. “A profoundly philosophical and
thought provoking work of art and should be seen by all.”

Installation in progress showing the various manifestations and dimensions
Materials and fabrication exploration

Installation process
"Plans for Scholarly Research and Publication,"

It is my deep conviction that the power of art to unite matter and spirit can play a very crucial role in building bridges amongst different groups of people regardless of their ethnicity, religious beliefs, cultural differences and political affiliations particularly in the context of the Muslim world and the West.

"This Exhibition of artistic masterpieces from the Islamic world underlines that the arts, particularly when they are spiritually inspired, can become a medium of discourse that transcends the barriers of our day-to-day experiences and preoccupations," said His Highness the Aga Khan. "Many questions are currently being raised in the West about the Muslim world, with countless misconceptions and misunderstandings occurring between our contemporary societies. I hope that this exhibition will hold a special significance at a time which calls for enlightened encounters amongst faiths and cultures."7

In today's world of increasing globalization where cultural divide is shrinking due to the power of Internet and telecommunications technology, there is a tendency to adopt the popular culture in lieu of one's own rich cultural and traditional heritage. How are we preparing for this cultural fusion in the field of Interior Design? Cross-cultural diversity is a strength that must be embraced by today's designers as a means to addressing some of these issues. It is my deep conviction that interior design can play a crucial role in preserving the integrity of historical traditions and cultures within a contemporary context globally. It is no longer suffice to isolate oneself geographically, culturally, or technologically into our own enclaves.

7 Sacred Art and Music of the Muslim World in Parma, Italy,
I intend to further my research through my installations as well as my writings. I hope to publish my findings in a variety of journals and textbooks with the notion that this important subject on cross-cultural diversity/symbiosis through art will be incorporated as part of the Interior Design curriculum to fulfill the needs of emerging designers with global vision.
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